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Author(s) Barbara M. Comber, Queensland University of Technology

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Literacy, place and pedagogies of possibility: working against residualisation effects and deficit discourses in poor school communities

Barbara Comber
Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology
Barbara.Comber@qut.edu.au

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Introduction

Australia has a long history of policy attention to the education of poor and working-class youth (Connell, 1994), yet currently on standardized educational outcomes measures the gaps are widening in ways that relate to social background, including race, location and class. An economic analysis of school choice in Australia reveals that a high proportion of government school students now come from lower Socio-Economic Status (SES) backgrounds (Ryan & Watson, 2004), indicating a trend towards a gradual residualisation of the poor in government schools, with increased private school enrolments as a confirmed national trend. The spatial distribution of poverty and the effects on school populations are not unique to Australia (Lupton, 2003; Lipman, 2011; Ryan, 2010). Raffo and colleagues (2010) recently provided a synthesis of socially critical approaches towards schooling and poverty arguing that what is needed are shifts in the balances of power to reposition those within the educational system as having some say in the ways schooling is organized. 'Disadvantaged' primary schools are not a marginal concern for education systems, but now account for a large and growing number of schools that serve an ever increasing population being made redundant, in part-time precarious work, under-employed or unemployed (Thomson 2002; Smyth, Down et al 2010). In Australia, the notion of the 'disadvantaged' school now refers to those, mostly public schools, being residualised by a politics of parental choice that drives neoliberalising policy logic (Bonner & Caro 2007; Hattam & Comber, forthcoming 2014; Thomson & Reid, 2003).

Unfortunately, the complexity and heterogeneity of the student cohort and of school cultures is mostly absent from dominant discourses on school reform and especially from School Effectiveness and School Improvement (SE/SI) paradigms that are now very influential in national policy regimes (Hattam & Comber, forthcoming, 2014; Thrupp, 2005; Wrigley, 2012). Such accounts fail to acknowledge the escalation of policy and demographic challenges facing schools, and that those challenges are qualitatively different in 'disadvantaged' schools. The challenge to improve classroom practice is greatest in high poverty and high difference contexts because the standard classroom or 'normal' practice is less likely to work here. Not because young people in these settings are less capable of success at school but because these settings often carry the burden of residualisation, they must rely upon the resources of first time teachers and leaders, and they must cope with high turnover of both students and staff and the material effects of poverty on student and community resources. In communities where almost everyone is poor (which teachers may see in deficit terms), the danger is that everyone gets low level group literacy pedagogies, texts and tasks. There can be a tendency towards default pedagogies (& Johnston, 2009)pedagogies of poverty (Haberman, 1991) and minimalist versions of literacy curriculum (Comber, 2012).

This paper briefly revisits key theories of social justice (eg Connell, 1993; Fraser, 1997, in Woods, Dooley & Luke, 2014) that have informed educational policy, practice and research over the past half century and to consider the situation in Australia with respect to the literacy education of children growing up in poverty. It introduces Massey's (2005) spatial theory which we have recently employed in our literacy research and which underpins a subsequent re-conceptualization of schools as meeting places (Comber, 2013). A case study of literacy pedagogy in an elementary school in a poor and changing area of South Australia is outlined. In this study teachers employed classroom design experiments to assess the affordances of place-conscious pedagogy for English literacy learning in their culturally and linguistically diverse student cohort. In the process the school as a knowledge-producing organization, a 'thinking and learning' institution (Boomer, 1985), is reclaimed. Data included interviews with school leaders and teachers, classroom observations, teacher curriculum documents, teachers writing, student products and performances. When place is made the object of study and research in classrooms, the affordances for assembling complex, critical and inclusive

literacies are considerable. Place can be studied from many different perspectives, including psychological, Indigenous, historical, geographic, architectural and so on, depending on the teachers' learning goals.

Social justice and literacy education

My work in literacy studies is framed by a concern with social justice and education and remains very much influenced by Australian sociologist Connell. Connell wrote a number of seminal papers (Connell, 1994) and books (Connell, 1982; 1993) during the eighties and nineties which theorized the complex relationships between poverty and education. Importantly, from my perspective, Connell maintained proper attention to the whole question of teachers' work (Connell, 1985) and developed the notion of curricular justice. Connell identified three considerations in relation to justice in designing curriculum:

1) The interests of the least advantaged
2) Participation and common schooling
3) The historical production of inequality

Connell argued the need to consider how curriculum privileges the knowledges and practices of advantaged groups within society and to think about ways in which it might be changed to consider knowledge from the standpoint of the poor and working-class, women, and culturally marginalised people. Connell interrogated valued knowledge in school curricular, argued for the need to consider other ways of knowing and to ensure that all students were supported to learn a common curriculum and not subjected to the negative effects of high-stakes testing and unequal access to learning.

Connell's emphasis on considering the standpoints of most disadvantaged in considering curriculum, assessment and pedagogical fairness, influenced my conceptualization of critical literacy. In this frame critical literacy involves three key moves.

- Repositioning students as researchers of language
- Respecting student resistance and exploring minority culture constructions of literacy
- Problematizing classroom and public texts (Comber, 1994, p. 661)

The assumptions are that all students can research how language works, that all cultural groups have significant contributions to make to our understandings of literate practices and that all texts should be subject to question. Early collaboration with teacher-researchers (Luke, Comber & O'Brien, 1994; Comber, Thomson & Wells, 2001; Vasquez, 2003) indicated that when teachers positioned children as researchers and incorporated their everyday ways of participating in talk around texts, even young children were able to take agency and produce texts questioning the status quo. In other words they assembled the semiotic resources to understand and argue for fairness.

In a recent discussion of critical literacy, Woods, Dooley and Luke (2014, p. 21), draw upon Fraser's (1997), conceptualisation of justice – namely, as redistributive, recognitive and representative. Redistribution is akin to Janks' (2010) view of access, whereby all students would learn valued literate practices, or the genres which count; a recognitive aspect would value the literate practices and cultural knowledge marginalised and minority youth bring to school. Representative justice means promoting textual practices which fairly represent the standpoints and interest of different groups. In these versions of social justice through literacy education there is a strong commitment towards students accessing understandings and capabilities that matter here and now, even as educators work to change what counts in the interests of diverse and disadvantaged groups. This is a long-term project and the responsibility is beyond what can be expected of individual teachers and even schools.

Beyond schooling, it is the relationships between people and places that produce poverty and inequities. Doreen Massey (2005, p. 157) points at that it is the 'success' of some places – 'power-geometries' – such as large cities like London, that produce poverty and exclusion in other areas (see also Harvey, 2009). Massey's reminds us that poverty is produced in particular places through political and economic decisions. This means that school reform always needs to be considered within a broader and material analysis of what is going on beyond the school, beyond the neighborhood, indeed beyond the state, to consider the

activities which produce under and unemployment, pockets of extreme and persistent cross-generational disadvantage and the associated problems of ill health, crime and so on. Teachers' work and what might be accomplished in school needs to be considered in relationship to and with proper attention to the priorities of everyday living, including education. Yet as Massey stresses places and the unpredictability of 'throwntogetherness' create the need to negotiate something new.

Some teachers are able to work with students' diverse cultural capital, what Thomson (2002) calls, their 'virtual schoolbags', in the context of the challenges and opportunities of the local environment (under construction, built and 'natural'). Such teachers are able to educationally exploit and build upon the diverse and contrastive resources of the classroom collective and the affordances of the place at that time.

Spatial Theory: Schools and classrooms as meeting spaces

Schools are material places. They are located in particular geographic sites, with different social, cultural and physical histories and characteristics and are dynamic and subject to change. Schools are also places in the sense that they are purpose-built (or adapted) structures for educating children and youth. That is, they have the materiality of built environments that include purpose-built structures and landscaped grounds. These in turn are located within the distinctive built environments of local areas, regions and neighborhoods. However, schools are also social *spaces*; people enter into and leave and interact in the social spaces of schools and the areas around them. In these purpose-built places people mix with diverse others and enter into social and educative relationships.

Many children in post-industrialized nations attend a designated elementary school, often a neighborhood school. Yet international research suggests that the *neighborhood school* is being erased as the result of neoliberal educational forces (Lipman, 2011; Lupton, 2003; Sanchez, 2011). The physical and metaphorical significance of 'the school' as a particular kind of place captures people's imaginations, as evidenced by the popularity of the genre of school stories across ages and cultures, such as the Harry Potter phenomenon, which is built upon an 'imaginary materiality' (Cresswell, 2004, p. 7). The obviousness of the school as a particular kind of built (or adapted) environment in a particular location leads us to take it for granted, yet children's (and teachers') everyday experience in school spaces is embodied, psychological, emotional and specific. Social geography offers a fresh perspective in helping me to see the school as a particular kind of place, offering specific kinds of spaces: social, cultural, and physical.

Doreen Massey's approach has been a catalyst in pushing me to think further about schools and classrooms as material and social places; places where people are forced to negotiate ways of being, relationships, and ways of acting. Massey posits that place can be thought of as 'an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories', a constellation that in turn 'poses the question of our throwntogetherness' (Massey, 2005, p. 151). Working with Massey's framing situates school literacy teaching and learning within the socio-material world and acknowledges the political nature of the diverse trajectories and histories that participants bring to school sites. It is also imbued with a sense of possibility, dynamism and movement. As she notes:

> Place …does change us…, not through some visceral belonging… but through the *practising* of place, the negotiating of intersecting trajectories; place as an arena where negotiation is forced upon us. (Massey, 2005, p.154)

This is not chaos where nothing can be done; rather, there is the sense that something must be done. Negotiation is not feared as a problem, but rather seen as an opportunity. Massey's approach to place avoids the determinism that is so often associated with educational discourses about working-class or poor areas, and also the hopelessness, wrought by some theories of globalization. Hence being constituted as an 'urban school' or a 'disadvantaged school' can only be understood in relation to the wider economics and politics that produce

poverty, in particular areas of a city or in rural or regional places. Understanding the politics of representation of people – a key objective of critical literacy – is contingent upon understanding the politics of places, the dynamic, situated and historical nature of relationships between people and places.

Massey (2005, p.130) understands places as relational, changing, as '*spatio-temporal events'*, which require ongoing negotiation. She sees space 'as an arena for possibility' which 'leaves openings for something new' (Massey, 2005, p.109). Educators can take responsibility for making school/places 'community spaces' in the sense that all spaces are socially negotiated. This allows educators to re-imagine the positive potential of schools – as institutions always under construction in terms of social relations which must be continuously negotiated – where different people are thrown together in a space located in a place and expected to not only to get on but also to learn together. Massey contests views of globalization which defend place as a victim and which assume territorial traditions are unproblematic; she challenges versions of place which see it as a surface and ignore its ongoing dynamism. Her approach is to consider the specificities – how local-global politics and power-relations are constructed in different places and situations.

Foregrounding the politics and relational dynamics of place reminds us that spatial dimensions should not be overlooked when it comes to considerations of social justice, nor consigned to context. The whole question of who is educated where and with what effects is fundamental to thinking about poverty and education and ways in which educators might work for social justice.

Place-conscious pedagogy: literacy learning re-imagined in a disadvantaged school

Taking a spatial turn as a literacy researcher was initially at least somewhat accidental. Because I was committed to undertaking collaborative inquiries with teachers in high poverty locales, I gradually came to consider the politics of places and to realize the limits of literacy for young people's learning and life trajectories, whilst maintaining my optimism for the durable affects of enabling teaching. The extended work with teachers in high poverty schools, focusing on literacy and space, has been discussed elsewhere (Comber, in progress; Comber, 2013; Comber & Nixon, 2008; Nixon & Comber, 2011). I also worked with colleagues located in regional universities who were engaging explicitly with the politics of place, pedagogy and curriculum (Green & Symes, 2007) and exploring the affordances of the spatial turn for educational policy and practice (Gulson & Symes, 2007).

In 2009 we embarked on a project entitled New Literacy Demands in the Middle Years: learning from classroom design experiments[1] (Cobb et al, 200). This project aimed to document and improve student literacy across the curriculum in the middle years via a suite of collaboratively crafted design experiments concerning the curricular literacies of science, digital media literacies and youth cultures and place-based pedagogies. The study was underpinned by the assumptions that in the middle years of schooling (years 4-9) teachers expect students to be able to read and write independently in subject-specific ways across the curriculum and that what constitutes literacy is also changing due to digital technologies. This project allowed a more concerted study to be undertaken with long-term teacher researcher collaborators, Marg Wells and Ruth Trimboli (Nixon et al., 2012, Nixon & Comber, 2011). The teachers already had strong understandings of critical and spatial literacies from earlier work. We started by reading recent related research about place-conscious pedagogy (Smith & Sobel, 2010; Somerville, 2007).

In 2010 new school buildings were being constructed at Wells and Trimboli's school and at the end of that year their existing school buildings were to be demolished. That year teachers and students worked alongside the building site. In conducting their design-experiment, the teachers explicitly positioned their students as journalists who were investigating the changes that were occurring around them and the perspectives of different stakeholders about those changes. These stakeholders included former and current teachers, parents, school workers (volunteers, grounds men, canteen staff), students, the school principal, the project manager and so on. Students were taught to interview peers and adults and to participate in building progress meetings. They ensured students were well rehearsed by practicing with each other,

and well prepared by taking along written protocols or lists of questions and audio recording devices.

Many students were learning English as a second or third language, hence asking questions confidently and audibly in public was a significant challenge. Both teachers set out to investigate how they could assist students "to develop as competent, confident communicators who can understand and embrace change". They aimed to help students to:

- gain more confidence speaking with adults
- articulate verbally in a loud clear voice and with confidence
- improve their questioning techniques
- feel confident about moving to a new school
- work successfully in groups or with a partner and have an equal say in the learning process.

Consistent with design-based experiments, Wells and Trimboli collected base-line data about their students' questioning and speaking in public in order for them and for their students to have a benchmark which they could refer for comparison later in the year. In these classrooms, students were being inducted into research and investigative journalism repertoires of practices. But these are not simply generic practices. For example, because students had studied the different materials that could be used in buildings, they were able to ask informed questions about these matters. They became interested in the different machines brought to the school to assist with various stages of preparing the ground, laying the foundations and constructing the building. They also became interested in how the building would be heated and cooled. All of this was taken seriously and the teachers brought in the building manager very few weeks to formally address such questions. Outside of the school grounds these children were witnessing the demolition of buildings and construction of new housing, and/or renovations of old housing, as part of the wider urban renewal project in the area. However, for most the opportunity to live in a new or improved house was unlikely due to their cost. Thus their access to in-depth learning about the construction and improvement of built environments could not be taken-for-granted in the out-of-school world. By making it the object of study within the classroom, the teachers invited them to engage at a deep level with material and social change.

Within the teachers' broader critical literacy project, children were positioned as co-researchers of places and the politics of places – not as passive victims or observers of change. The teachers systematically expanded children's knowledge about building design helped them to become critical readers of, and respondents to, official planning documents. As Luke, Dooley and Woods (2011, p. 150) argue, reading comprehension is "a cognitive *and* social *and* intellectual phenomenon", and thus, "substantive knowledge content and visible connections to material, phenomenal, cultural and intellectual worlds are keys to sustainable achievement gains". That is, not only were children working on issues that mattered to them and to the community, they were also meeting the curriculum and learning goals that schools are required to achieve (Holdsworth, 2005, p. 146).

Children's views were also being taken seriously in ways that assisted them to exercise agency, communicate their views and experience active social participation in the evolution of the school. For example, guided by Wells, students realized during the process of careful examination of the plans that the design for their new school did not include a space for drama, something that they currently enjoyed in the old school's layout. Working collaboratively, they wrote a submission to the newly appointed principal to request that the new school design be altered to include a drama/performance space. Their collective rationale for why this space was so important to their learning was positively received, and the school plans were altered accordingly, making this a powerful example to the children of their potential agency as critical readers and communicators who could effect action. As Wells expressed it:

> The students became the ones with the knowledge. They realised they could question things that were happening in their lives, that they could have a voice, be heard and, at times, make a difference.

Following Massey (2005), if classrooms are considered meeting places, where opportunities exist for something new to be negotiated, then students' diverse histories, identities and cultural resources and the changing nature of the neighborhood and the school can become assets rather than a problem. Teachers who work with students as co-researchers and constitute the classroom as a site of inquiry report high student motivation for tackling challenging academic work and complex literacy projects. The potential of working with theories of critical and inclusive literacy, spatial theory and place-conscious pedagogy has yet to be fully explored (but see Green & Corbett, 2013). This is not to romanticize place (Nespor, 2008) but rather to see the materiality of place and spatial relations as proper phenomenon for young people to study and through which to develop distinctive discursive resources.

Remaking literacy pedagogies in places of poverty

This work begins to demonstrate the affordances of place-conscious pedagogy for students' literacy learning and social participation in the middle years. For instance, across the archive of student work samples produced in these classrooms over time, were instances of young people conducting surveys, writing recounts (of their first day at school), descriptions (of a house design) and directions (for getting to school), producing photo-stories (of the neighborhood walk and 'my belonging space'), learning how to produce storyboards (for films about their preferred places in the school), planning a whole school assembly to report on their work, and so on. Learning about new genres and media of communication is thus accomplished in the context of students representing and sharing their experiences of places, including the 'changing places' of the school and neighborhood.

In order to produce complex and thoughtful products with impact in the world it is necessary for students to first build up their conceptual knowledge and linguistic resources. The focus on academic learning and acquiring new discursive resources is consistent with other accounts of 'high-expectations curricula' (Dudley-Marling & Michaels, 2013) and community- and place-based pedagogies in schools (Smith & Sobel, 2010). Building up students' field knowledge through practice and successive iterations, and mobilizing their understandings developed from their experiences, places them in a powerful position to design texts that represent their learning in its depth and complexity and enable them to be powerful communicators. Multiple opportunities to share their learning and their productions, and to discuss related concepts and questions, also allows students to consider different angles and perspectives on issues and problems, become better informed about them and influence what happens around them. This is an important aspect of social participation as citizens.

Ambitious projects such as these take time and persistence; hence the full story and analysis of such pedagogy is beyond what can be reported here. However some common themes and principles can be described. Firstly, such projects are relevant to students' concerns and situated in the everyday but dynamic worlds of schools and their surrounds. Secondly, students are explicitly encouraged and assisted to connect their prior everyday knowledge with new and academic forms of knowing across the learning areas. Thirdly, such projects include creative and challenging language and literacy events that assist students to learn the discourses (vocabulary, genres, media, etc) associated with formal knowledge in subject disciplines and beyond. Students are given multiple opportunities to test out and practice their developing expertise with different modes of meaning-making. High standards are set for learners and the goals are ambitious in terms of the production and sharing of knowledge in complex print and multi-media texts. Finally, wherever possible, social and public outcomes for the work are planned (e.g. publications in school newsletters, formal presentations at school assemblies, books produced for class and school libraries, submissions to organizations and people in positions of authority) and students are encouraged and

enabled to assume responsibility and exercise agency about issues that matter to them and their communities.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) remind us of the necessarily 'local' nature of teaching:

> Even as teaching becomes more and more public, it remains at its heart, *radically local*—embedded in the immediate relationships of students and teachers, shaped by the cultures of schools and communities, and connected to the experiences and biographies of individuals and groups. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009, p.10)

In these times of 'policy borrowing' (Lingard, 2010), where translocal discursive practices of standardization and performativity travel into the very hearts and minds of teachers (Ball, 2003), we believe that accounts of local accomplishments of critical pedagogies are urgently needed to nourish an increasingly fatigued and alienated profession and to retrieve an educational imagination. Infusing our work with understandings about place and space from other disciplines has given us extra tools to fight for high quality free public education in schools serving poor communities. If teachers cannot imagine their pedagogy beyond the next high stakes literacy test we become an impoverished educational community. It is time to mobilise teacher knowledge, developed and practiced locally though it may be, and recruit their expertise in the cause of curriculum design that is genuinely inclusive and simultaneously challenging. The rhetoric about ensuring 'excellence and equity' needs to be more than policy-speak.

Despite the force of globalization we need to resist storylines which takes a deterministic stance and leave no hope. A number of educational theorists (Apple, 2010) and social geographers (Massey, 2005) point to the importance of hope in imagining and taking action for justice. Soja (2010, p. 21) argues in the context of globalization that 'justice' is increasingly a 'mobilizing concept' for a widening range of organizations and groups with the escalation of economic and ecological disasters and imminent threats such as terrorism, war, poverty and genocide. Young people can learn to work for justice from the outset of schooling and that they can best begin this work by considering the everyday micro-politics of the classroom and the playground, the school and the neighborhood.

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